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RECONCILING AN ETHIC OF CARE WITH CRITICAL MANAGEMENT PEDAGOGY

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ABSTRACT

The ethic of criticism has stood at the heart of Western pedagogy for centuries. It has been the basis of science, morality and art as well as for the building of social and political institutions. The author argues that this ethic of criticism is sometimes at odds with the ethic of care, one that commits the carer to look after and take responsibility for the well-being of the cared-for. This ethic of care is further undermined by contemporary consumerism and its inroads into the fields of education and learning. The resulting perception of management as a field of study for young people is entirely instrumental – an effective stepping stone to launch a career, but one devoid of either intrinsic interest or social value. The author makes a plea for an enduring reconciliation of an ethic of care with an ethic of criticism as the basis for management education that is both interesting and socially useful.

I recently attended an educational fair in Greece representing my university. It was organized by the British Council and over sixty UK universities were present. The event, held in a prestigious venue, was widely covered by the local media and attracted an estimated 6000 potential students and their parents on each of its two days. Any observer could easily notice the usual phenomena associated with educational consumerism – raised voices by university salespeople as they tried to make themselves heard in the general hubbub, exaggerated claims hyping various educational ‘products’, lavish brochures and so forth. The sense of being in some kind of bazaar where different wares were being exhibited and traded was patent everywhere. What might have been less noticed were the potential students, the ‘customers’ attending the fair. Many prospective postgraduate students arrived in groups of three or four and gave the impression of sophisticated consumers who were discriminating between different offerings and were able to distinguish between the chaff and the grain, though what was chaff to some was grain to others. I was more interested, however, in the numerous potential undergraduate students who visited the fair accompanied by one and, often, two parents. What struck me was the deep parental concern, reflection and care regarding choice of university and choice of course. On several occasions, I discussed at length the merits of a young man or woman opting for a business course as against an engineering or a classics course, sometimes having to mediate between the two parents arguing animatedly against each other, while their offspring looked baffled and anxious.

I did not find that it was easy to make the case for a business or management education. While the strength of a business degree in the labour market was taken for granted, it seemed to me that there was little to make business and management attractive in their own right to prospective undergraduates. Unlike music, mathematics or engineering, they do not appeal to individuals with a ‘natural vocation’. Few students can be said to have a vocation for management studies. Those who have a vocation for business may indeed prefer to try their luck setting up their own businesses after the model of Richard Branson or Bill Gates rather than study business at university. Nor was management the natural destination for those students who, still swayed by the noble idealism of youth, want to make the world a better place – they tended to go for the social and political sciences or for education. Psychology seemed to attract much interest (often against parental discouragement) among those young people with deeper existential anxieties and troubles who longed to gain a better understanding of themselves and, maybe, their parents and their friends. Business and management seemed to be the favoured destination of those who were undecided and wanted a safe degree for all purposes. I noticed that the salespeople’s pitch on these disciplines never praised them as areas of interesting scholarship or socially valuable functions. Instead, they were presented as handy stepping stones for the launch of careers.

This prompted me to reflect on the reasons why few today regard business and management as areas of study either inherently interesting or socially useful. Would it not make sense, for example, to celebrate the prodigious range and variety of disciplines that are used to cast light into organizational life? Management scholars have drawn from numerous traditions – in addition to economics, psychology, politics and sociology (to say nothing of engineering), these include philosophy, anthropology, gender and women's studies, semiotics, mathematics and informatics, computer science, literary theory, psychoanalysis, postmodernism, folklore, cultural and consumer studies. Could young people not get excited about this veritable cornucopia of intellectual traditions available to them as students of management and business?

Maybe more important is the failure to show that beyond individual careers, management and business studies have the potential of being socially useful. Why, for example, not extol the benefits of these studies for the effective running of hospitals and schools, for enlightened and responsible running of enterprises large and small, for the competent and benevolent running of government departments and non-government organizations? Might a better management education, for example, have forestalled various organizational disasters from the opening of London Heathrow's Terminal 5 to corporate collapses and business scandals? An earlier, maybe more optimistic, generation of students might have linked the command of knowledge about organizations with better running of organizations. This was a time when the trading of 'knowledge' had not been regularized and commodified through the consultancy profession and when a bright young mind with an up-to-date command of economic or social sciences and a degree of common sense could be relied upon to see what ordinary people could not. It was a time when Kurt Lewin could comfortably argue that 'there is nothing so practical as a good theory' (Lewin, 1951, p. 169), a time when the Tavistock Institute could function as the spearhead of social science that would revolutionize the workplace and advance the post-war Labour government's socialist agenda. It was a time when a seminal study of socio-technical systems in the mining industry could be co-authored by an academic researcher and a practising miner (Trist & Bamforth, 1951). It was the time when *Human Relations* was founded as the journal that would allow the integration of social sciences to the end of making this a better world ruled by unregimented and undivided scientific reason. It was a time when it was hoped that middle-level theorizing could overcome industrial unrest and injustice, inefficiency and prejudice.

Fast forward 50 years and what do we find? First, a management academia that claims anti-performativity as a major virtue, that is, the idea that no concept, theory or principle that it proposes should directly or indirectly find a practical application¹. Second, a management class that obtains its qualifications in the very universities whose academics advocate anti-

¹ See, for example, the discussions in the August and October 2007 editions of the *Academy of Management Journal*; also (Fournier & Grey, 2000) on how anti-performativity has become one of the essential qualities of critical management research.

performativity and who are largely sceptical or even disdainful about the practical value of abstract theories. Third, a consultancy profession that has filled the gap between theory and practice, by seeking to translate academic ideas into applicable or actionable knowledge. And fourth, a class of instrumentally-driven and confused prospective management students destined to be initiated in theories and practices of little intellectual challenge or practical value, merely as the entry ticket into management.

Of course, I am not going to make a plea for uncritical practical theories that are fatally compromised by narrowly understood managerial interests and blind to the social, moral and environmental contexts within which organizations function. Critical management studies have rightly made us aware of the ways knowledge is inextricably linked with power, exercised in subtle and invisible forms through seemingly neutral and natural discourses – through linguistic categories, labels and conventions, through spatial arrangements and through organizational procedures and routines which appear to be fair or, at least, unbiased (Alvesson & Willmott, 1992). Power operates by blocking or silencing alternative conceptualizations or constructions. Critical reflection is rightly seen as the foundation stone of learning and knowledge creation (Mingers, 2000).

This critical ethos goes back to the Greeks who developed a systematic questioning of what appeared as incontestable truths. Subsequently, Western philosophy and Western science questioned all received wisdoms. In particular, they challenged religion, tradition and common sense. But this Western tradition also involved a systematic criticism of social and political systems, a systematic criticism of leaders and public officials. Criticism was a major force in the Western Enlightenment and prompted many subsequent scientific developments. The criticism of past theories thus becomes the starting point for developing newer, more powerful ones. The criticism of past political institutions becomes the starting point for developing newer, better ones. Thus, criticism emerged as a systematic challenge to tradition by what claimed to be the forces of reason. In the 20th century Critical Theory raised criticism to still greater heights, by arguing that much of the knowledge generated in a capitalist system becomes itself part of exploitative relations between classes and nations. Critical theorists and many Critical Management Studies scholars have since argued that we must persistently search for the hidden assumptions, silenced voices and invisible power regimes inherent in seemingly neutral 'knowledge'.

Criticism can be positive or negative – at its most basic it involves a judgement of quality. Negative criticism entails a dissatisfaction with the status quo and a decision to challenge it in some way. At its simplest, it states "X is not good" where X can be a work of art, a person, a theory, a government or virtually anything else. At a more elaborate level, criticism states "X is not what it seems"; it then seeks to show that what seemed incontestable can be challenged and shown to be contestable or untrue. The rather unattractive use of 'critique' as a verb often

serves to distinguish it from 'criticize'. To criticize usually means that something is not good or as good as it should be; to critique suggests that something is not what it appears to be or that some of the conditions of its existence have not been adequately understood.

Critical reflection thus emerged as the principal value in most management and professional education programmes today, in part as an attempt to counter the passive embracement of panaceas and stock recipes. The 'reflective practitioner' (Argyris & Schön, 1978) is today's equivalent of Plato's philosopher-king. Critical reflection offers a way of reconciling experience with theory in the generation and application of knowledge. Managers, professionals and practitioners of all sorts (such as consultants, therapists etc.), according to this approach, should seek to question their practices at every stage. Theoretical knowledge from their disciplines as well as narrative knowledge, communicated through stories, anecdotes and recipes, should be applied with caution and consideration for the particularities of specific situations.

Yet, it seems to me that the value of criticism is itself sometimes accepted uncritically. Is there a downside to criticism? Criticism can be destructive. This is especially so if it is experienced as unfair; but even fair criticism can undermine or destroy a theory, a process or a person in their early stages of development. Thus many a good idea have been killed by criticism. Many promising organizational members have been discouraged or devastated by harsh criticism by their leaders. Another negative aspect of criticism is revealed when it is undertaken in the name of fashion – criticizing yesterday's ideas and practices may then amount to little more than uncritical embracement of the new and the modish. Some criticisms are aimed at straw men and driven by envy, hate or resentment. In all these ways, one should mistrust criticism and critique even when they are extolled as the keys to learning and knowledge. It is not so difficult to see why students from different cultural backgrounds, notably far-Eastern ones which honour loyalty and tradition, find our attitude toward criticism deeply troubling.

The harmful potential of criticism is most evident when what is criticized is dear to us – the artist's canvas, the academic's idea, the gardener's garden. And nowhere is this more acute than in criticizing a parent's child; after all, in their different ways, one could say that the canvas, the idea and the garden, are all their creator's 'babies'. Parents generally care for their children in ways that make criticism painful and difficult to accept. I noted in the opening the deeply caring attitude with which parents approached the education of their children in the Athens educational fair, the resources, attention and engrossment dedicated to the process of selecting a university and a course. I noticed one more thing about these parents. This is something that I have been able to confirm with several other Greek academics working in the UK with whom I consulted. In choosing a university, these parents valued highly the presence there of a Greek academic who would keep an eye over their off-spring act 'in loco parentis'. "You will take special care of my son/daughter, if they come to your university, will you not?"

several were asking directly or indirectly. Such special pleading may be dismissed as a sign of narrow patriotism (or even nepotism) but it can also be viewed as typical of what several authors, in the last twenty years or so, have described as the ethic or ethics of care. Treating the person under your care as special, making special provisions and allowances for him or her, is one of the characteristics that distinguishes the ethics of care from more conventional 'ethics of justice' that treat all as formally equal and subject to general principles. For example, Virginia Held, puts the case clearly:

Those who conscientiously care for others are not seeking primarily to further their own individual interests; their interests are intertwined with the persons they care for. Neither are they acting for the sake of all others or humanity in general; they seek instead to preserve or promote an actual human relation between themselves and particular others. (Held, 2006, p. 12)

Interest in the ethics of care grew as a result of the argument, first put forward by Gilligan (1982), that many girls follow a different path of moral development from boys, one that does not revolve around rights, rules and abstract principles of justice, but centres on compassion, care and the ability to sustain intimate relationships. Since then, a great deal of work on the nature of care has been done by psychologists and philosophers alike, leading to an increased recognition of the importance of care in all human relations. Every child spends a prolonged period of dependence into the care of others – this leaves deep residues for later life; caring for others and being cared for are experiences that are liable to awaken powerful emotions from a person's earliest past and evoke reminiscences of infantile dependency and powerlessness (e.g. Ruddick, 1989). The ethics of care do not seek to discover universal principles of ethical behaviour, but rather how people sustain fragile networks of relations that allow people to grow and prosper, developing trust, respect and responsibility for each other.

While the ethics of care have been vigorously contested as the basis of a universal morality, the importance of care as a key dimension of identity, interpersonal relations and social institutions is now increasingly recognized, especially in societies like ours that must care for large numbers of old, young, sick and weak. Caring is paramount for education – the teacher being the first to inherit from the parent the mantle of the carer. Without caring schooling is little more than discipline and incarceration and higher education little more than an introduction to consumerism and careerism. It is for this reason that, we often hear, in education, cries that "nobody cares", or worse, that many universities have adopted an attitude (especially vis-à-vis foreign students) of 'take the money and run'². Instead of caring, a deeply cynical attitude surfaces, one that views universities as money-grabbing institutions,

² See the depressing views expressed in <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/magazine/7275452.stm>

academics as ineffectual narcissists, students as throughput and academic qualifications as something to be gained through work, ingratiation, coaxing or plagiarism.

As an academic, I occasionally see such a cynical attitude surfacing – but more often than not, it is attributed by one group to another. On the other hand, I have plenty of opportunities to observe academics going out of their way to assist students (way beyond what they might do if they viewed them merely as customers, fodder or throughput); I observe many students who gradually develop a deep interest in their studies and seek to translate their learning into something that will assist them in their practice. And I observe many classrooms in which there is a real sense of discovery, of excitement and even exhilaration. Above all, I notice the qualities of ‘going the extra mile’ and personalized attention that are trademarks of an ethic of care. The co-existence of an ethic of care with an ethic of criticism have always been at the heart of the teacher-student relation, a coexistence that values the impersonal in relation to criticism and the personal in relation to care. Care without criticism destroys learning every bit as certainly as criticism without care.

This then is the plea with which I would like to conclude this piece celebrating forty years of Management Learning. Let us seek to maintain the troublesome and difficult balance of criticism and care at the core of our activities – as management educators we may be the last line of defence not just against uncritical practice but equally against uncaring critique. Failing to maintain this balance would be casting ourselves in the permanently sidelined role of disempowered critical virtuosos.

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